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Citation for published version:

Vaninskaya, A 2010, 'Current approaches to William Morris studies', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 3-4. <<http://www.morrissociety.org/publications/JWMS/18.4/18.4.Editorial.Vaninskaya.pdf>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of William Morris Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Editorial

Current Approaches to William Morris Studies

Anna Vaninskaya

In July 2009 the Cambridge Victorian Studies Group hosted the joint conference of the North American Victorian Studies Association and the British Association for Victorian Studies. The theme was 'Past versus Present' and, not surprisingly, papers on William Morris abounded. The conference showcased the wide range of approaches and topics -- from art history to anthropology, and from print culture to politics -- that a student of Morris might take up. A special panel devoted to 'Morris Past, Present, and Future', chaired by Peter Stansky, featured Caroline Arscott on 'William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones: The Unity of Matter', and Florence Boos on 'The Defence of Guenevere: Morris's Eternally Recurrent "Pasts"', a revised version of which appears as 'The Defence of Guenevere: A Morrisian Critique of Medieval Violence' in this special issue. Other papers included Elizabeth Carolyn Miller's 'William Morris's Utopian Print and the Politics of the Future', Chris Hokanson's 'Butler, Morris and Wells: Cultural Reproduction and Transference of Memory in the Victorian Age', Caroline Sumpter's 'Barbarian Futures: Imagining Moral and Social Evolution in Late Nineteenth-Century Predictive Writing', and Ruth Kinna's 'Morris: Time and Utopia', which forms the basis for the penultimate article in this issue.

Although it has not been possible to reprint all the conference papers, the two included here, in conjunction with Phillippa Bennett's 'Riot, Romance and Revolution: William Morris and the Art of War', and my own 'William Morris: The Myth of the Fall', address from their various vantage points the interconnected themes of violence, history, and the means of social transformation. Whether one chooses to focus on Morris's early poetry or his late activism, whether one asks of his work literary, political, or philosophical questions, one cannot avoid the issue of conflict in history. Armed conflict -- be it in the time of the Roman Empire, in medieval France, in the streets of contemporary London, or in the revolutionary future -- is ubiquitous, and its role as the driver of historical change is as vital to Morris's political theory as it is to his verse and prose romances. Morris was a man of paradoxes, and it is often difficult to reconcile his 'pacifism' and professed abhorrence of acts of violence with his narrative love of a good fight in the right cause, or his strategic thinking in matters of urban warfare. Florence Boos, who has written about these themes before ('Dystopian Violence: William Morris and the Nineteenth-Century Peace Movement', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, Spring 2005), reads the *Defence* poems in light of this

paradox, stressing Morris's gift for 'identification' and its evolution into the historical 'understanding' of his later years. Despite the endemic violence and the 'Hobbesian war of all against all' portrayed in the *Defence*, the volume may be seen as a first attempt at the recreation of 'living cultural memory' which preoccupied Morris for the rest of his life.

Warfare and conflict remained central tropes in the romances (past and future) of the 1880s and 90s, though by this time, as Phillippa Bennett demonstrates, they were indissolubly linked with Morris's conception of social revolution. In fact, his response to events like Black Monday and Bloody Sunday and the battle metaphors of his political lectures fit perfectly with the violent imagery of much socialist and anarchist rhetoric. Although Morris came to realise that the contemporary socialist struggle would not be played out on the battlefield, he never ceased to long for a complete overthrow of capitalism. The values and ideals of the Communist barbarians were still worth fighting for: the socialists of the present had much to learn from the conflicts of the past, and the romances helped him to envision the 'process of social transformation' through battlefield moments of individual self-sacrifice for the community. Mythical warfare enacted the concerns of nineteenth-century politics, violence was a catalyst for social change and for the growth of 'revolutionary consciousness'.

The lessons taught by historical struggles for justice feature just as prominently in Ruth Kinna's exploration of Morris's and his collaborator E. B. Bax's philosophies of ethics and history. The cause of the fourteenth-century peasant rebels dramatised in *A Dream of John Ball* was the same as that of the Victorian workers, but though the latter stood at the right historical juncture, a moment ripe for social transformation, they lacked the 'moral courage' of their predecessors – will to change and the circumstances of historical development were mismatched in both cases. But 'Morris identified socialist ethics with a past hope in a way that suggested continuity in history': unlike Bax, he was neither hostile to utopianism nor sceptical about the knowability of the past. On the contrary, an understanding of history was essential to securing the coming revolution, past battles provided the model for future action.

Was this a belief that Morris took with him to his grave, or did he eventually moderate his views, accepting 'gas and water socialism', as Phillippa Bennett reminds us, as a 'necessary first stage' on the road to the Great Change? This is the subject of the final article in the issue, which reconsiders the controversial question of Morris's supposed falling away from purist principles in the 1890s. What course was social transformation to take if revolutionary violence was no longer a possibility in the short-term? On what other fronts could the battle be fought? The special issue concludes with the industrial and parliamentary

conflicts of the last decade of the century, having begun with the soldiers of the Hundred Years' War. A lot had changed in the almost forty years between the youthful Morris's first poetic endeavour and the mature Morris's attempts to form a united socialist party, but his preoccupation with the historical importance of struggle remained constant.